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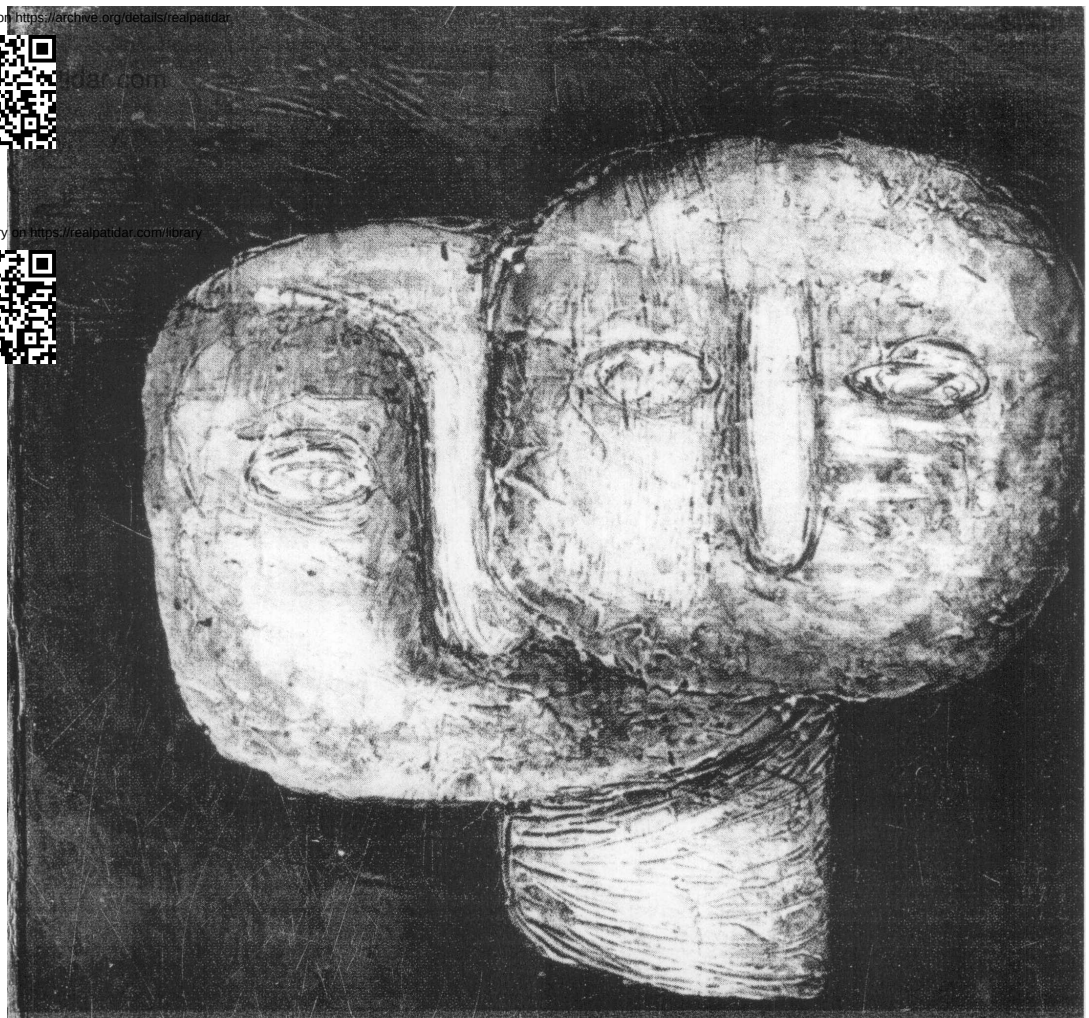

Religious Conversion in India

Modes, Motivations, and Meanings

edited by
ROWENA ROBINSON
SATHIANATHAN CLARKE

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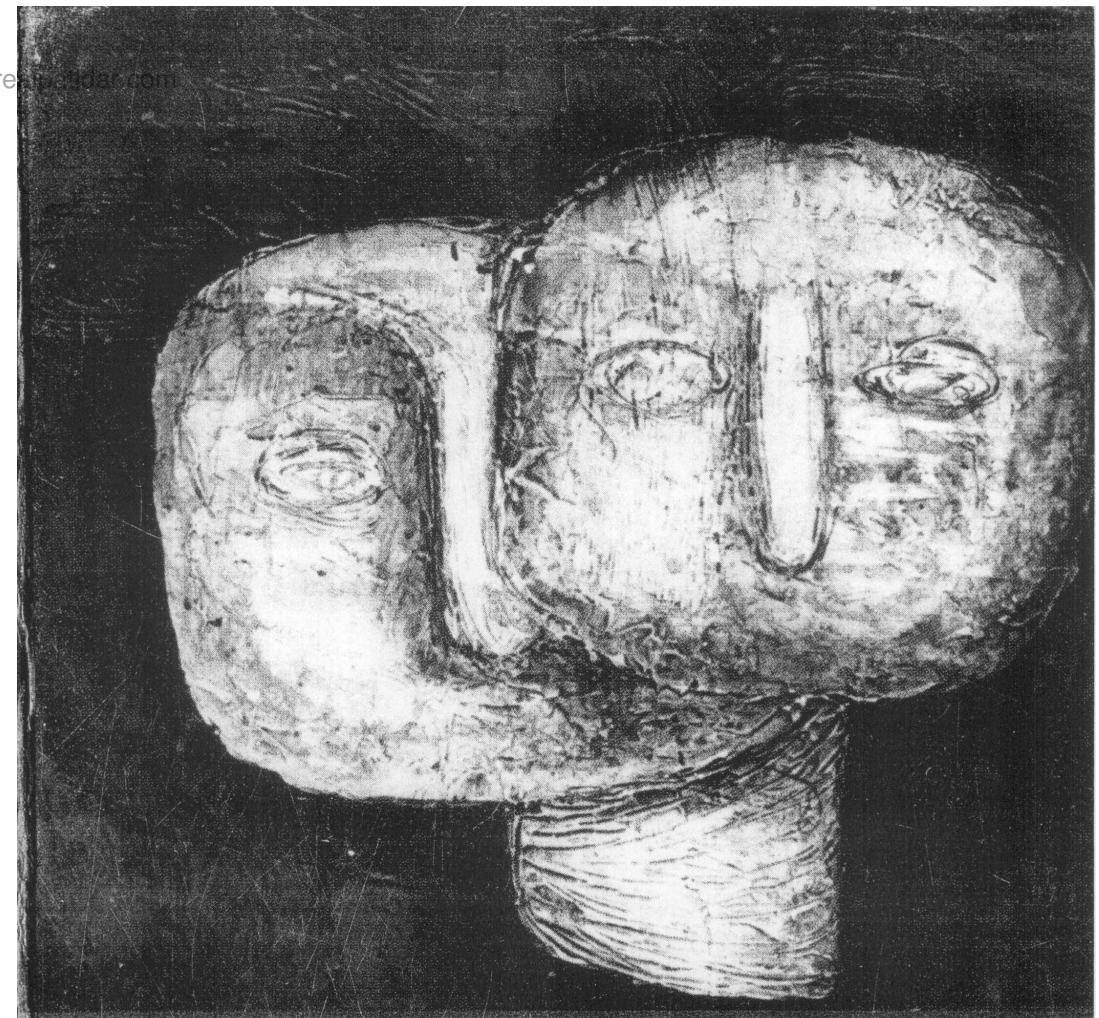

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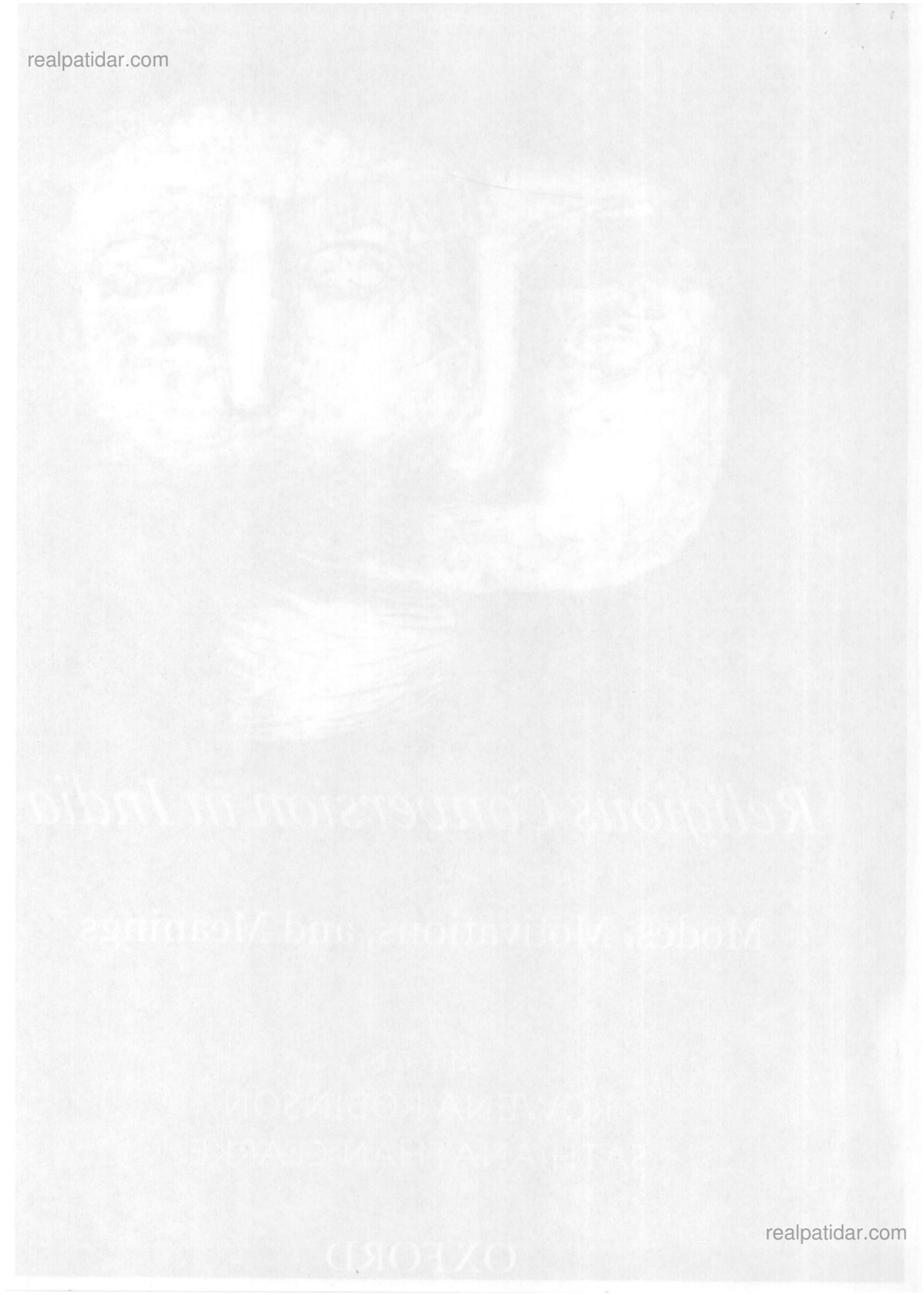

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Diverting the Ganges:
The Nizari Ismaili Model of Conversion in South Asia

Dominique-Sila Khan

Contrary to a sectarian trope that has become common in contemporary India, in the past, proselytism has not been a part of the Muslim religious policy of the subcontinent. For the Sunnis who represented the Islamic mainstream in South Asia, conversion had never been a priority: rulers expected their Hindu subjects to submit and pay the obligatory taxes (*jiziya*) rather than to change their religion. And if Sufis exerted a deep influence on the local population, it seems that, in most cases, they were not directly or actively involved in conversions. Till the end of the nineteenth century, the word *dawat*, currently used to refer to Muslim missionary activity, had a different meaning (Gaborieau and Clémentin-Ojha 1994: 21–2). Besides, as a number of scholars have attempted to show, forced conversions are a part of the colonial myth, which was later adopted and reinterpreted by Hindu nationalists. (Maclean 1989: 22–31).

Proselytism was however widespread among a few Muslim minority movements, such as Ismailism. This particular branch of Shiism, which penetrated into the subcontinent from the ninth century onwards, used the term *dawat* to refer to its mission which consisted in a highly organized network of propagandists called *da'i*. As Ivanow has remarked, 'The Batini (i.e. Ismaili) *da'i* already at an early date becomes a prominent figure in the annals of Islam'. He is viewed (by the Sunni authors of the Medieval and later periods) as a

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decidedly negative character: cruel, shrewd, diabolical ..., he is, as Ivanow writes the chief 'villain of the plot' (Ivanow 1939: 1).

To understand this particular phenomenon one must briefly recall that, from the very beginning, Shias, whether Ithna-Asharis (literally, 'Twelvers') Ismailis or other minor sects, have always evolved in strong opposition to the Sunni rule and schools of thought (Daftary 1998: 23–36). Besides, even during the short periods when Ismailis ruled in certain regions (the Fatimids of Egypt and the Nizaris of Alamut) they had to fight a constant battle in order to survive in a hostile environment, being threatened by the Sunni rulers and at times forced to embrace their form of Islam if they wanted to avoid extermination.

As far as South Asia is concerned, the Ismaili *dawat* was first established in Sindh where a *da'i* was send in AD 883. Although not much is known about that period, the main event recorded by various historical documents is the capture of Multan by Jalam bin. Shayban who was sent to that region by the Fatimid Caliph, approximately one century later, around 985. During that period the rulers of Multan succeeded in securing from the local population the allegiance to the far away Imam who is—according to the Ismaili doctrine—the supreme spiritual leader and the only sacred authority able to interpret the esoteric Islamic message embedded in the Koran. Besides, the alliance struck with the Sumra Rajputs and their conversion to Ismailism may have played a major role in the Fatimid vassal kingdom of Sindh. Later, following the raids of Mahmud of Ghazni (eleventh century) and of Muhammad Ghori (*c.* 1192), the Ismailis suffered a severe set-back; little is known about the periods during which the followers of the Imam were forced to change their religion (this actually meant reverting to their former Hindu beliefs or adopting Sunnism) or conceal themselves in various ways. However, after the decline of the Fatimid kingdom of Egypt and the split of Ismailism into two main branches—the Nizaris and the Mustalis—the *dawat* organized by the Nizaris whose main center was in Iran, in the Daylam region, continued to be active in the subcontinent, keeping Multan as its centre[1]. In this way, Multan—and later on the nearby Ucch—became the symbol of the continuity of the Ismaili mission: this location was of particular significance, as it also became, at a later time, a major centre of Sunni Sufi orders,

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particularly of the Suhrawardis who were the main opponents of the Nizaris.

It seems that the Sumra rulers eventually adopted the Nizari form of Ismailism (Nanji 1978: 36, 39, Daftary 1990: 479, Kassam 1995: 61–7) which was to spread to other parts of South Asia in a highly acculturated form. One should specify that at an early stage the doctrine of the Ismailis had been influenced by Greek philosophy, in particular by neo-platonism and by Gnostic ideas. These characteristics—many of which were common with the other branches of Shiism—made it appear quite different from the Sunni 'legalistic' form of Islam. Instead, as a number of scholars have remarked, Ismailism and Sufism had many traits in common (Corbin 1986: 152–4). The Ismailis also supported the claims of non-Arab Muslims (who had an inferior status in the social hierarchy), although the Imams themselves sought legitimacy from the descendants of Ali by Fatima; in fact, their doctrines had imbibed social ideals of a revolutionary nature (Daftary 1990: 91–141), conveying at the same time strong Messianic expectations (Khan 1997b and Khan and Moir 1999).

Although the Ismaili tradition of the subcontinent has largely remained unexplored to this day, various theories, justifications or explanations have been proposed for the emergence of the South Asian acculturated form of Nizari Ismailism; known under different names such as Sat Panth (True path), Gupt Panth (Secret path), Nizari Dharm (Nizari religion) etc., it has often been labeled 'syncretistic'. One should bear in mind that the subcontinent was the only (initially) non-Islamic region of the world where the Nizari mission penetrated with success—but when Islam became an important feature of South Asia, in terms of political rule as well as religious affiliation, its dominant form remained Sunnism. Therefore, the first element, which should be taken into consideration is the context in which Ismailism developed.

It has been argued that the success of the Nizari *dawat* was mostly due to the fact that the people to be converted were gradually led onto the new path, by adopting a form of religion, which at first sight, looked no different from their earlier beliefs and practices. Actually, the Sat Panth appeared outwardly as one of the numerous medieval Indian sects and the similarities between its doctrines and

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rituals and the earlier faith of the converted people were stressed as a clever 'strategy of conversion'.

The second element is said to have been the necessity of keeping secret one's affiliation to Ismailism during the whole period which starts from AD 12 and ends roughly with the arrival of the Imam from Iran in the 1840s. This is in fact an essential trait of the Nizari tradition of South Asia. The followers could hardly practice their religion openly in those regions that were under the domination of Sunni rulers. An important consequence of this fact—which has been totally overlooked by scholars writing on medieval Indian history or religion and society—was the authorized Shia practice referred to as *taqiyya*[2] (Daftary 1990: 566 and passim).The constant necessity of concealing one's true faith during a long period, which extended over many generations, gave rise to various interesting phenomena. First, a good number of Nizaris lived outwardly as Hindus (these groups were later known as 'Guptis', or the 'secret ones') Sunnis or Twelver Shias, a factor which throughout the Medieval period may have endowed them with a liminal identity[3] , but which even during the British rule with its census operations and separate personal laws, may have resulted in many misunderstandings. Second, during periods when the Ismaili *dawat* lost its strength, suffering a series of setbacks and splits (a process that started from the fifteenth century onwards), the Nizaris' followers became increasingly attracted towards different religious traditions, which permitted them to coexist more easily with other communities in various local contexts—till some of them totally shifted their allegiance and eventually made their outward identities coincide with their actual beliefs and practices[4]. Lastly the South Asian version of Nizari Ismailism is said to have developed for another reason: from its very beginning—and in compliance with more general Islamic ideas—Ismailism claimed to be the fulfillment and culmination of all former religions. But while Sunnism was considering only the great revealed monotheistic religions, Judaism and Christianity, Ismailism was more inclusive and, in the South Asian context, also took into account the various beliefs connected with Hinduism. Myths related to saints, ascetics or divine avatars (in particular the ten main incarnations of Vishnu who played a prominent role) were made a part of the greater 'secret' Ismaili History which thus became a meta- or hiero-history (Corbin 1986:

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98–107); similarities between indigenous and Islamic/Ismaili beliefs and rituals were brought to the foreground and used to build up a new religious practice in accordance with the Ismaili ideals (Nanji 1978; Shackle and Moir 1992).

The Ideal Missionary

The importance of conversions within the Ismaili tradition—a tradition that clearly associates religious and political ambitions—is reflected in the key role played by the missionary or *da'i*[5]. Although not much has been found in written documents concerning this important figure, Ivanow, was able to collect some information on this subject (Ivanow 1939) and give an idea of the way in which Fatimid propaganda was organized. Referring to the exaggerated negative traits which were ascribed to him by Sunnis, he rightly observes that this, 'mythical-figure has forever acquired historic reality, completely obscuring the real Ismaili propagandist and teacher' (Ivanow 1939: 2). According to the same author and to Daftary (1990: 124 and passim) the extraordinary successes of the *dais* during the Fatimid period can be accounted partly by the political, economical and social conditions of the Islamic world at that time. Continuous unrest and dissatisfaction, social inequalities as also economical problems created an ideal setting for them, the more so that the figure of the Imam or spiritual leader, so central in Ismailism, had always been connected with the figure of the Muslim *messiah*, known as *Mahdi* and *qaim*, the restorer of justice and equity expected to 'rise' at various times[6]. It seems that the *da'i*—after a very careful selection—could enjoy a very independent position so that the whole system of propaganda could be decentralized. Once chosen and invested with full power by the Imam of the time who fully trusted his competence and loyalty, the missionary was able to organize his work without constantly referring to the supreme authority. This fact was of particular importance in so far as, during long periods, the Imam had to conceal himself and live in disguise, so that most followers did not even know where he was residing at a particular time. While obliged to recognize him as the supreme

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spiritual authority, they had very few chances of ever getting his sacred vision or *didar*[7].

Apart from its political ambitions, and its temporary political successes which led some historians to overlook other aspects of the tradition, Ismailism had always given a key role to teaching and preaching[8]. The term *dawat* itself came to be used by Ismailis to refer to their own religion, while their opponents continued to call them by various names, such as *malahidas* or heretics (Daftary 1990: 5). Once ordained, the *da'i* was not only committed to preaching and teaching, but to accepting, on behalf of the Imams, the oath of allegiance of the followers (Ivanow 1939: 6). This oath—as we will also see later—is actually the outward sign of what would be referred to as 'conversion' in our modern language.

Some Ismaili texts mention the duties, but also list what the main virtues of the *da'i* should be: he should be highly educated but should remain modest, have a deep knowledge of the languages and customs of the region where he is to preach, maintain self-discipline, know how to keep secrets entrusted to him (in the Ismaili tradition this last point is of exceptional importance). 'The *da'i*—must carefully study the ideas which he preaches, must personally know every member of the community, know their affairs, their aspirations. With this knowledge at his disposal he must gradually deliver his call to God and His saints, in such a way as not to overtax the intelligence and the patience of his audience. When he has explained to his followers what he wanted to teach them, he must know how to handle them. He must learn to observe the people, recognize the state of their minds, their abilities, extent of their endurance.' (Ivanow 1939: 15). Another essential point is that, before converting, the *da'i* must acquire respect and create an atmosphere of friendliness and goodwill among the people in whose hands authority is concentrated in a particular place.

Nothing seems more adverse or contrary to the Ismaili ideal than accepting followers who join the community for considerations of money or any other worldly interest, and of course, forcible conversion. During the Fatimid period, according to the documents examined by Ivanow, after formal allegiance through an oath, teaching is imparted only gradually to the new convert. The missionary does not reveal at once the whole doctrine, nor does he

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teach him in the presence of the non-initiated. The disciples also must not disclose to the others what they have been taught by their spiritual guide.

All these traits are of exceptional importance, since they will continue after the split of Ismailism into two main branches, and constitute essential features of the Nizari tradition.

Much has been written on the Persian and Syrian Nizaris, and the fact that, during the first phase of their history, they were known in the Medieval world as 'the sect of the Assassins' reveals to which extent the figure of their leaders, Imams and *da'is* had become mythical. We cannot dwell at length on the characteristics of this particular branch of Ismailism, but it should be stressed that, during that period, political activities and messianic aspirations both closely linked—were in the foreground. In popular accounts the *da'i* could be viewed as a kind of secret agent or revolutionary leader acting blindly on behalf of the 'Grand Master of Alamut', misleading the faithful (as some thought through the use of drugs such as hashish) and claiming to show them an 'artificial paradise' through a whole drama enacted in the fortress of the Daylam region of Iran (Lewis 1967: passim and Daftary 1990: 324–434). However, after the destruction of Alamut, if the mission continued to be active—also in the subcontinent—the Imams had to conceal themselves and mostly live in the guise of Sufi Pirs, being even, in some cases, formally affiliated to some Persian mystical orders (*tariqas*) (Daftary 1990: 412, 437, 451). At that time, the shift of emphasis (or better, of priority) from political power to a policy of peaceful conversions was, logically enough, reflected in the figure of the missionary. The *da'i*, mainly known as Pir (the Persian equivalent of the Arabic word Shaikh referring to the Sufi saints) also appears outwardly as one of the numerous *beshar* or *bashar* dervishes wandering from Iran to Turkey, Central Asia and India[9]. Similarly, the converts traditionally referred to as *momins* (i.e. believers, a term which will be in continuous use) will also be known as *murids* (disciples) in conformity with the traditional Sufi terminology stressing the importance of the master-disciple or *piri-muridi* relationship.

In the South Asian context a new element, however, is introduced: the presence of a majority of non Muslims following a great number of local religious traditions which, at times, widely differ

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from each other. If Ismailis are threatened as heretics in the eyes of the local Sunni rulers, their Hindu subjects are allowed to go on with their own customs, laws and styles of life. Although it is still, in many of its aspects, shrouded in obscurity, owing to the scarcity of written documents or inscriptions, the Nizari missionary activity in the subcontinent, will still continue to be active even after the various setbacks and splits that occured mainly from the fifteenth century onward. In the religious literature of the Indian Nizaris, generally known as *ginans*, which has probably a much longer period of oral transmission, before being transcribed and kept in manuscripts (Shackle and Moir 1992: 15), the figure of the ideal *da'i*, in its new indigenous context, is reflected to a certain extent: the Ismaili missionary does not only appear as a Sufi Pir, but also as an indigenous ascetic or yogi (Nanji 1978: 68, 75) according to the context in which he has to work. For this very reason many of the Pirs who were active in the subcontinent during the Medieval period seem to be endowed with a dual religious personality: Pir Shams Sabzwari (12th or 14th century) continues to be revered by ex-untouchable Meghvals of Rajasthan who have (maybe for a long period) dissociated themselves from Ismailism and become reHinduised, as 'Samas' or 'Samik Rishi' (Khan 1997a: 48, 70–2), the fifteenth century missionary Pir Sadruddin seems to have been known as well under the name of Sahadev, his son Hasan Kabiruddin (listed among the Sufi Suhrawardi saint as Pir Hasan Darya) is said to have been famous among Hindus as 'Anant-jo-Dhani' (the Lord who saved innumerable crores of souls) and is portrayed as wearing saffron and white sadhu robes and keeping to a strict vegetarian diet.

In this way, the ideal Nizari missionary of south Asia was a multifaceted figure who worked in an inconspicuous way, in order to avoid persecution at the hands of the Sunni authorities, as well as to convert the local people more easily.

'He diverted the Ganges ...': Miracles and Conversions

A recurrent theme in the life of saints and divine incarnations, gurus and Pirs—which is alo familiar to most religious traditions of the

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world—is the capacity of sacred figures to perform miracles and, in this way, to attract followers into their orbit. Whenever and wherever competing movements or personalities are confronted, this process is illustrated by a 'miracle contest' in which two rival spiritual teachers attempt to win over disciples. In Sufi hagiography, for instance, the famous twelfth century Pir, Khwaja Muinuddin Chisthi, is said to have defeated in this way the local Nath Jogi Ajaypal (Currie 1989: 76–81). In the oral tradition of Rajasthan the two 'folk' saints Ramdev and Jambha (supposed to be the founders of two rival sects or *panths*) (Khan 1997a: 192) also vie with each other in order to demonstrate their spiritual power. In the Nizari tradition, Pir Shams, the Ismaili saint buried in Multan, whose hagiography transcends sectarian barriers, performs various miracles: in one of them, he shows his superiority over the Sunni Suhrawardi saint of Multan Bahauddin Zakhariya (Nanji 1978: 53–4). Miracles and supernatural powers are also used to attract followers and make conversions.

A striking theme found in the Nizari hagiography and preserved in the sacred literature of the *ginans* is a miracle story connected with the Ganges. As is well known, through the centuries, the holy river has been perceived as a powerful unifying symbol: the worship of the sacred river could be shared at least by all upper caste groups, in spite of their different, at times totally opposed sectarian affiliations[10]. The miracle is generally ascribed to two prominent Ismaili saints: Pir Shams and Imam Shah (who is revered as a Sayyid missionary by the Agakhani Nizaris and as a Pir or even an Imam in the Satpanthi-Imamshahi sect of Ismailism).

In the sacred history of the Imamshahi branch of the Satpanth (Ivanow 1936; Khan and Moir 2000) the fact that the majority of followers belong to the Kanbi community (currently referred to as Patels or Patidars), is accounted for by the miracles performed by Imam Shah. The most popular version of the story goes in this way: a group of Gujarati Kanbis are going on a pilgrimage to the Ganges when Imam Shah meets them at the village of Girmatha (near Ahmedabad). The saint explains that it is useless to go so far and, during the night, in their sleep, the pilgrims are transported to the holy river. They bathe, perform all the rituals and eventually, when they wake up, understand that they have not really moved from Girmatha. Acknowledging the superiority of the Pir, the Patidars

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become his followers and are gradually let into the esoteric knowledge of the Satpanth. After the miracle, most of their caste-fellows also embrace Ismailism. From that time onwards they will play a prominent role in the development of the sect and in the management of its main shrine, at Pirana, near Girmatha (Khan and Moir: 2000).

A variant of this theme is found in a devotional hymn ascribed to the great missionary buried in Multan, Shamsuddin Sabwzari, popularly known as Shams Tabrez[11]. In a village, the Pir meets a group of pilgrims consisting of Brahmins, Banyas and Gola Ranas. While they are bathing in the river, the two disciples of Shams, Vimras and Surbhan, are also performing their ablutions. As some drops of water from their bath fall on one of the Brahmins' body, he gets angry and claims to have been polluted by impure men. The offended Hindus go to the Ismaili saint to complaint.

Here are a few verses of the *ginan* translated in English by Hooda (Ivanow 1948: 86–8):

> The-Brahmins said: "O great saint! (We are so angry because) we cannot be purified except by bathing in the holy waters of the Ganges".
>
> The *Pir* then stood up and walked towards the village. And lo! the waters of the Ganges river began to flow before them from the sands!
>
> All bathed in it, came out, bowed to the *Pir*, and sat around the place where he was sitting.
>
> They began to implore the *Pir* to consent to becoming their lord and spiritual guide.

These few verses tell us of the particular process through which an Ismaili saint succeeded in converting Hindus belonging to the upper or 'pure' Hindu castes. The conclusion and final part of this *ginan*—which will be examined in the next section—also exemplifies the meaning of conversion in the Nizari tradition of South Asia. But before going further let us make a few additional remarks on the miracle, which consists in 'diverting' the Ganges and on its symbolic value.

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In the legends connected with the Bishnoi tradition, a lesser known *panth* of Rajasthan and Punjab, the saint Jambha, also known as Jambheshwar Pir (Khan 1997a: 187–208), demonstrates to his disciples that pilgrimages are useless, very much like the Medieval Saints Kabir, Nanak and Dadu; he explains that God dwells everywhere, but first of all in the heart of his devotees and then in the assembly of the faithful. Near Bikaner, there is a sacred well connected with the saint's hagiography: the present disciples of Jambha, the Bishnois or Prahladpanthis, claim that using its water to purify oneself is much better than taking a holy bath in the Ganges, since their guru Jambha once caused the Ganga to flow into that well. The belief of the Raidasi Chamars (untouchable leather-workers and disciples of the fiteenth century Sant Ravidas) in the purifying and healing power of the water in which hide has been dyed has a similar meaning and is still more challenging: it is like the water of Raidas's *kundi* (the traditional vessel used by leather-dyers) in which the holy Ganga was also made to flow.

In a devotional composition of the Dadupanth, the Ganga 'goes out of her way' at Kashi to pay obeisance to the great sixteenth century Sant Dadu Dayal and to receive from him religious instruction (Thiel-Horstmann 1991: 261).

In the *Vara Bhai Gurdas*, a Sikh hagiographic text similar to the Janam-sakhis, Guru Nanak, the founder of the sect, firmly establishes his *Panth* as a distinct one through a series of symbolical gestures and deeds: first, he discards the robe of a *fakir*, and to show that he is no more a renouncer, puts on the ordinary dress of a householder; then, before appointing his successor, Angad as the next Guru 'he caused the Ganges to flow in the opposite or reverse direction ('*ulati Ganga vahaioni*'), a sentence which could possibly be interpreted as 'he diverted the Ganges'[12]. Here again, we have a powerful metaphor: the establishment of a religious movement (including conversions and appointments of spiritual successors) which is in open and direct opposition to the Brahmanical order or *dharma*—symbolized here by the Ganges—and nowadays often perceived as representing the 'true' essence of Hinduism.

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The Meaning of Conversion: Discipleship and Allegiance

In Pir Shams's above mentioned *ginan*, impressed by the saint's miracle, all the pilgrims decide to bathe in the waters of the Ganges diverted by the Ismaili missionary and then go to the village to spread the news: they have taken the holy bath, 'without having incurred the heavy expense that the pilgrimage would have costed!' (Ivanow 1948: 87). Later on, the men request the *Pir* to reveal to them the, 'True Faith' (*Ibid.*)[13] and the saint asks them to accept the preaching of his disciples: the first stage, according to this text, consists in listening to the 'verses of *dnyan*'. These are the Nizari hymns referred to as *ginans*, which contain the bulk of the teaching imparted to the disciples of the Satpanth.

Before examining the last part of the text, one should note that the word *ginan*, deriving from the Sanskrit *jnana*, precisely means 'knowledge': in this way the sacred literature of the Satpanth represents the esoteric message imbedded in the Koran, expressed in a language understandable to the new local converts. The oldest written forms which have been found to this day date back to the eighteenth century, and in the twentieth century many of them have been printed in the original sacred (and once secret) *khojki* alphabet, earlier referred to as *Gurmukhi*[14], and later in the Gujarati and Urdu scripts. The Nizari Ismaili *ginans* of South Asia can be divided into longer and shorter texts, dealing with different themes: there are hymns of instruction, ritual hymns, devotional songs, texts with messianic and eschatological themes and tales of the mission (Shackle and Moir 1992, 2000). Many of them are still sung during the sacred ceremony of the Nizari community of India and Pakistan, currently referred to as Agakkhani Khojas

Let us go back to the story: later on, the newly converted participate in this ritual known as *ghat-pat*. During this ceremony, the assembly of the faithful sing the *ginans* but also partake of the consecrated water (*amiras, amRt, paval*) from the *kalas* (the sacred vessel also called *ghat*) which is placed on a low table (*pat*). The oath of allegiance is taken after the whole ritual is completed and the disciples are told to pay the obligatory tithe or *dasond*. The

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conclusion of the *ginan* which is to be found in the final verse is meaningful: 'all the pilgrims whose faith in their Pir was strong, then immediately had reached their Ganges' (Ivanow 1948: 88).

Therefore the Ganges serves as a powerful metaphor of liberation and salvation: the first stage of the whole process of conversion, which is triggered by a miracle (consisting here in diverting the course of the holy river), is followed by religious teaching imparted through the *ginans* and by participation in a ritual where the faithful partake of the sacred nectar and eventually, after the formal oath of allegiance, by the payment of the customary tithes[15]. Conversion occurs here in two main phases: the first one is represented by the establishment of the *piri-muridi* relationship, in a way which is very similar to the Sufi tradition (Pinto 1995 and Troll 1989), whilst the second and last one is marked by formal affiliation to the Satpanth (oath and payment of tithes).

Some scholars have argued that many people went only through the first stage, accepting the spiritual teaching and the *piri-muridi* relationship without necessarily becoming an affiliated member of the *panth*: according to them, this phase constituted the essential part of the Ismaili tradition which, very much like Sufism, was mystical and esoteric in nature[16]. Although such cases have certainly occurred (a number of disciples may not have gone beyond the first stage or may have, later on, separated from the main branch to become independent or create their own *panth*), it must be emphasized that, as a historical and social phenomenon, the Nizari Sat Panth could penetrate, spread, develop, and survive in its different forms, only thanks to its strong organizational structure: the religious message may have been mystical by nature, but the followers, who were bound by secrecy, constituted a fairly homogenous community with its sacred seats, its main Pirs and its network of local missionaries and religious leaders, sharing the same beliefs, but also similar sacred texts, rituals and obligations (Khan 1997a).

A key role was played by the sacred gathering of the faithful referred to as *jamat*—which would later give its name to the assembly hall of the Nizaris or *jamat-khanas*[17]. The *jamat* was also known as *gat*, a synonym which also means 'path' (like the word *panth*) but designates here the, 'local congregation of the believers, or more

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loosely, the Ismaili "community" to which they all belong' (Shackle and Moir *ibid.*: 148). The combination *'gat-ganga'* or *'gat sarovar'* (*Ibid.*: 155) refers precisely to the fact that, according to the Satpanthi doctrine, the holy river, particularly at its sacred confluence or *triveni*, is located in the assembled congregation: in one *ginan* (Shackle and Moir, *ibid.*: 86–7). Pir Sadruddin addresses the *jamat* in the following words: 'listen, o holy stream (literally Ganges) of the congregations' (*ani sunio gatiun ganga ...*).

Actually the Ganga, diverted by the Pirs for the benefit of the believers, also symbolically dwells within the sacred vessel (*ghat, kalas*) as *amRt* or *paval*. However, it is necessary to recall that this particular theme, which is essential for the understanding of the Nizari religion of South Asia and of its particular method of conversion, had its roots in the indigenous tradition: during the second day of the bright half of the lunar month of Asoj (Sanskrit, Asvin, when the Nauratra festival starts, the cult is performed to the Goddess represented in the form of a sacred vessel in which the sacred water (*amRt*) is actually the Ganga itself which flows in the ritual *kalas* (Kinsley 1987: 112).

In this way it is possible to see to which extent the Satpanthi ritual adopts earlier rites and symbols familiar to the converts. However, the same elements are made to function in a different manner: the concept of purity, for instance, is still present, but has been given a very different meaning, since it is not more related to castes and to the taboos which are customary among Brahmins and higher caste groups. Purity, instead, is obtained through inner knowledge and participation in the sacred *gat-ganga* where people of all castes, tribes, and former religious affiliations can gather if they accept the teaching of the Pir and recognize the Imam as their supreme spiritual leader (Nanji 1982: 106). The connection with earlier indigenous traditions is maintained, as far as the Nizari *paval* may evoke the indigenous *amRt* (used to wash the feet of divine images or gurus) and, to a certain extent, the semen virile or other substances partaken during certain left-handed Tantric ceremonies (Ivanow 1948: 37–8 and Khan 1994).

Besides, the water being sometimes mixed with the sacred earth of Karbala (associated with Imam Hussein's martyrdom) further links

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the faithful with the broader Shia tradition of which Ismailism is a part. Later on, when the arrival of the Imams Aga Khans in the subcontinent (from the 1840's onwards), and the socio-political context of the subcontinent (the final phase of British rule, Independence and Partition) trigger a series of changes, the Satpanth becomes gradually 'reIslamized', attempting to realign itself on the pattern of Sunni Islam. Islamic symbols are then put into the foreground (*Ibid.* 105–08): analogy is sought, for example, between the consecrated *amBt* contained in the *ghat* and the water of the sacred well of Zamzam in Mecca (*Ibid.*: 106). The term *amiras* (*amBt*) or *paval* are replaced by the Arabic *0b-i-shifa* (water of healing).

A series of *ginans* attributed to Pir Shams show the gradual process through which Hindu worshippers of the Goddess are led to the 'True Path': at first, without saying anything about his identity or his intentions, the saint participates in their ritual including the typical Garbi dance—still popular in Gujarat during the Nauratra festival—and while dancing with them, slowly reveals to the participants the secrets of his religion. Kassam (1995: 109) has shown through an interesting diagram that the Satpanthi *ghat-pat* ceremony can be also interpreted as a 'revised' version of the Nauratra ritual in conformity with the Ismaili teaching: each indigenous element is carefully replaced by a Nizari symbol which transforms it, giving it a different meaning, without disrupting the general 'structure' of the ritual. Ali, as the Imam and manifestation of the Divine light replaces the goddess Durga and the Pir the Hindu priest; the circle of dancers becomes the *gatt-jamat*, while the substition for the Vedas and Puranas are the *ginans* or esoteric Koran and the *garbi* itself or lamp-pot (symbol of the Devi which the devotees worship) is transformed into the holy vessel containing the sacred nectar. This 'pattern of change' would be still more convincing if the author had remembered to mention that during the *Durga Puja*, which is first performed on the second day of the bright half of the month of *Asvin* (*Asoj dUj*), a pot supposed to contain the sacred water of the Ganges—which is also the divine nectar of immortality churned by the gods from the ocean of milk, is actually worshipped by the devotees of the Goddess (Kinsley, *ibid.*: 111–12).

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Waiting for the Mahdi: Modern Tales of the Mission

When historical circumstances brought the first Aga Khan, the Nizari Ismaili Imam, into the subcontinent during the 1840s, a new chapter was initiated in the history of the *dawat*. As successive manifestations (*mahzar*) of Imam Ali, himself an epiphany of the Divine light (*nUr*), the Imams had a particular role to fulfil on the earth and one of them was also expected to appear at the end of a cycle of time as the restorer of justice, *Mahdi* or *Qaim*. In the Satpanthi tradition Ali and all the Imams were identified with Kalki, the tenth avatar of Vishnu, expected for the end of the *Kali yuga*[18].

Although the subject has remained unexplored to this day, tradition has it that, during that period, the arrival of the first Imam was announced to many as the imminent advent of the tenth avatar. As a result of this expectation some devotees (possibly Guptis or ex-Nizari reHinduized communities) would have even built temples to Nikalank, as the Ismaili Kalki was called: in those shrines the original image was a riderless horse, who could have been viewed simultaneously as Kalki's mount and as Duldul, Imam Ali's horse[19].

In fact, whether they were accepted as the expected Mahdis, or perceived at least as partial 'restorers of justice', the successive Aga Khans attempted to reorganize and unify the scattered community. Their task was particularly difficult owing to one major fact: the tradition of *taqiyya* (precautionary dissimulation of one's faith) which had continued over long periods of time, had gradually led some groups to shift their allegiance, and their religious identity had largely remained 'liminal'—not fitting into the clear-cut categories defined by the British census. Those who were referred to as Guptis were perceived as half-Hindus half-Muslims by those who knew something of their customs, rituals and beliefs. Other Nizaris had identified themselves with Sunnis or Shia Ithna-Asharis. One should briefly mention, at this stage, the various of court-cases and the religious reforms which, during that period, led to the redefinition—but also to the discovery by many—of the history and development of the Satpanthi Nizari Ismaili tradition which had largely remained unknown to the non-initiated (Masselos 1978, Nanji 1978). The Aga

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Khans urged all those who wished to remain his followers, to come out of concealment, as the practice of *taqiyya* was no more relevant during the British rule; they were told to practice their religion openly and to replace their Hindu names by Muslim ones. It must also be noted that this process was a gradual one and has remained incomplete to this day: some groups had either preserved their allegiance to different branches of the Satpanth, such as the four Imamshahi sects known as Imamshahis, Panchias, Sathias and Athias, or retained earlier customs and continued to form separate '*Gupti jamats*'[20].

Sultan Muhammad Shah, Aga Khan III, played a major role in reorganizing and reforming the community, as he also did in the politics of pre-independence India (Boivin 1994). Besides, in the 1870s various reformist bodies and revivalist organizations had started to play a major role in the subcontinent. The British census had largely contributed to crystallize the religious identities into blocs which began to be viewed as rival, competing communities in the political and economical life of the Empire (Jones 1976) The Arya Samaj, founded by Dayanand Saraswati, was later joined by the Sanatan Dharm movement in his campaign of 'reconversion' to Hinduism—or at least what they chose to define as such—through the ceremony of *suddhi* (Jones 1976; Jaffrelot 1994; Gaborieau and Ojha 1994).

Reconversions of Muslims and 'purification' of untouchables who were, in this way, introduced into the world of 'higher Hinduism' (that is to say of its Brahmanical version) have been dealt with much more frequently than the interesting cases of the 'liminal' communities who were urged to become 'full-fledged' Hindus by various reformist bodies, while they were simultaneously approached by Muslim organizations who wished to teach them 'true' or 'orthodox' Islam (Mayaram 1997). In this way, some communities (such as the untouchable Meghvals) who had been once converted to Ismailism by local missionaries working for the *dawat* centered in Uchh-Multan, and had preserved a number of Muslim customs even after coming under the influence of Hindu movements, submitted to the *suddhi* ritual including, in their case, a ritual meal in which they were compelled to eat pork—which had become taboo after their conversion to Islam.

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Interestingly enough, when Sultan Muhammad Shah told the Guptis to abandon *taqiyya*, give up certain Hindu customs and change their names into Muslim ones, he is said also to have invited his disciples to partake of a meal in which the main course was beef. In this way, the Aga Khan III wished to stress that from that day onwards the Khojas would be fully identified with the larger Muslim community[21]. In these two striking examples, one can see how similar but opposite customs or taboos are used as symbols of reconversion.

Sultan Muhammad Shah is also said to have converted to Ismailism a group of untouchable Bhangis (scavengers) in Maharashtra, while residing in Pune. During the Medieval period many Bhangis from Punjab (who later migrated to Gujarat and Rajasthan and are commonly referred to as Balmikis or Lalbegis) had, it seems, already been converted to the Nizari Satpanthi faith by the missionary Bala Shah also known as Balmik or Lal Beg (see Khan 1997: 156–7). Thus, the tradition of converting untouchable groups and uplifting them, which appears to have been an essential aspect of the *dawat* was resumed by the third Aga Khan.

However, the trend towards 'reIslamization' was a gradual and slow process so between the last decades of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the religion of the Nizari Khojas had retained many of its Satpanthi elements.

Personal history can also serve to illustrate the Ismaili model of conversions during that period. We will limit ourselves to the study of one particular case[22].

A young Gujarati student, belonging to the *Darzi* (tailor) caste, was a staunch devotee of Krishna. He used to meditate for hours and complained to his deity in the following way: he bitterly regretted having been born too late to be able to meet him personally. Once, after a long period of meditation, he had a vision of Krishna who told him that, in fact, he was still living in this world and that his devotee could have his direct vision (*darsan*) as soon as he recognized him. The young man went to many Vaishnava temples of Saurasthra—the region where he lived—but none of the images he saw was similar to his vision. One day, at school, he told one of his friends that he was himself a devotee of Krishna and wanted to know which deity his classmate revered. The latter promised to bring him a picture of

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his God. On the following day the boy, who was an Agakhani Khoja, brought a calendar with the photograph of Sultan Muhammad Shah. His friend experienced a deep emotion when he immediately recognized the figure of Krishna he had seen in his vision. Let us remember that, in the traditional Satpanthi idiom, the Imam is identified with Vishnu and with his successive incarnations, and that, he is perceived, in the form of Kalki-Nikalank, as an avatar of Krishna and of Buddha[23].

As the Hindu student wished to be initiated into the religion of his friend, the latter brought him to the *jamat-khana*; however, to begin with, the Khojas did not let him participate in their rituals and it took some time before he was eventually initiated and accepted as an Ismaili. After his formal conversion he started to take part regularly in the *ghat-pat* ceremonies. Discovering that he had changed his religion his family was at first unhappy, but all its members were converted in turn when the young boy, challenged to prove the 'superiority' of his God and performed a miracle by reviving a dead calf. Rejected by their caste-fellows (with whom they could no more inter-dine or intermarry), the whole family eventually migrated to Surat where, at first, they had to join the Nizari *Gupti jamat*. Later on, they left the Guptis and were accepted by the Khoja community. Their descendants are now regarded as full-fledged Agakhani Khoja Ismailis.

Conclusion

This brief survey of the traditional methods and processes of conversion of the Nizari Ismailis of the subcontinent can help illustrate the differences which traditionally existed between Sunnism (including its Sufi versions), Twelver Shiism, and Ismailism in South Asia. At this stage, one could address an important question which has been the object of debate among the few scholars who have written on this branch of Islam: should the extensive use of indigenous elements be regarded merely as a historical process, a temporary strategy, or does it have a broader significance and meaning?

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Nanji, for instance, sees it as a 'cross-cultural approach' which played an important role during 'periods of transition', and understands the 'reIslamizing' trend as the 'constant need to resolve the ambiguities or even contradictions that occur between past practice and allegiances to new ones'(Nanji 1982: 108). Kassam analyzes syncretism used as a 'smooth' process of conversion in one of Pir Shams's *ginan*, and thinks that, 'By creating tension the coexistence of foreign elements demands resolution', finally a shift of identity takes place, 'so that the true path is no longer Hindu but Isma'ili': in the figure-ground symbol, the two faces then cease to be perceived and only the chalice is recognized and identified (Kassam 1994: 241). By studying the historical and religious debates amongst Indian Ismailis between 1840 and 1920, Moir however, sheds light on lesser known facts, which results in a somewhat different perspective (Moir: forthcoming). The existence of 'other voices' among the present Nizari communities of South Asian origin settled in various parts of the world, as well as the present debates which continue among the Imamshahis of Gujarat and Maharasthra (see Khan and Moir 2000b) regarding the importance of retaining or not the traditional, so-called 'syncretistic' elements, also tend to highlight other aspects of the same question which ultimately is related to a broader issue of inter-religious and inter-communal relationships.

The specific and original features of the *dawat*, the 'composite' or 'cross-cultural' nature typical of South-Asian Nizari Ismailism can well be rooted in a particular 'strategic' approach to the issue of conversions, as they may have been dictated by special historical circumstances which required the followers to resort extensively to *taqiyya*; however, if we keep in mind the sociological approach, as well as the philosophy and meta- or hiero-history which characterizes Ismailism as a whole, practically from its very beginning, in various parts of the world, one can see the whole picture from a different perspective. While there is no denying the fact that Ismailism has its historical and religious roots in Islam of which it has always claimed to be a part and, even more, its 'truest' version, the phenomena that are currently perceived as 'Hinduizing', or 'reIslamizing' traditions in the context of the Medieval and modern Indo-Pakistani subcontinent, may themselves be a part of another temporary historical process that creates new types of confrontations and conflicts. Actually

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such conflicts may have not necessarily existed in this form in the past, although in the twentieth century many tend to think that it has been a permanent trait of the history of societies, communities and religions. In this way the Satpanthi typical 'Ismaili approach' of conversions and religious teaching in South Asia may have a deeper and more durable meaning. The fact that this tradition has always survived by adapting itself to various circumstances and contexts without loosing its essence and forgetting its aims discloses another remarkable trait: the potentiality to universalize religion within a particular system of beliefs and practices.

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Notes

[1]The Nizaris of Iran and Syria were known by the Medieval historians as the 'Assassins'.

[2]Nizari Ismailism has not traditionally been a part of Islâmic studies in the subcontinent. For instance, most authors writing on the religious movements which developed in Punjab during the Medieval pēriod have totally ignored the existence of an Ismaili mission and important pockets of followers.

[3]The Shias practising *taqiyya*, that is to say concealing one's true faith for fear of persecution, and in particular the Gupti communities of South Asia, can be compared to the Jewish Maranes of Spane and Venice, and to the 'Nicodemite' Christians. It should be stressed also that till the nineteenth century clear-cut religious identities had not yet crystallized in the subcontinent (see Khan, forthcoming).

[4]This phenomenon is still happening within the Imamshahi Satpanthi sect of Gujarat and Maharasthra. See Khan and Moir 2000b.

[5]According to Daftary (1990: 228), 'All Isma'ili authors agree that the world, presumably the non-Fatimid part of it, was divided into twelve *jaza'ir* (singular, *jazira*; literally, island), for *da'wa* purposes; each *jazira* representing a separate and somewhat independent region or diocese for the penetration of the *da'wa*'.

[6]For a definition of the *Qaim* and of *qiyamat* see Daftary 1990: 564. Khan 1997 b and Khan and Moir 2000a deal with messianism and eschatology in the Nizari Satpanthi literature.

[7]To be regarded as a true member of the Ismaili community the follower has to 'recognize' the Imam, that is to say, understand his real personality beyond appearances, as well, the inner meaning of religion. *Didar* (here

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the blessed and sacred vision of the Imam when he is recognized) is a concept which is very close to that of *darsan* in the Hindu tradition.

[8]One of the names by which other Muslims referred to Ismailism was *talimiyya* or the'sect of teaching' (Ivanow, *Ibid.*: 6).

[9]The existence of numerous wandering dervishes and Qalandars of all types in Medieval India, some of them perceived as 'heterodox' by the Sunni theologians (see Digby 1984), enabled the Nizari Pirs to conceal their real identity. In this way their presence has not been clearly recorded in history and can sometimes be traced only through oral sources (see Khan 1997a). To this day many Ismaili missionaries of India are still regarded as Sunni or Twlever Shia saints in the Sufi writings (Asani 1991: 3).

[10]The Ganges is still used by fundamentalist organisations, such as the VHP, as a powerful symbol which can help to bridge sectarian differences among Hindus, oppose the religious minorities, and promote Hinduism and *hindutva*: for instance the movement against the construction of the Tehri dam, which would allegedly destroy the essential character of the holy river, and the protest against the film *Water*, which the famous director Deepa Mehta started to shoot at Varanasi.

[11]The Ismaili saint Pir Shams Tabrez has been confused, in popular tradition, with Rumi's spritiual teacher known as Shams-e Tabrez who certainly never came to India (Nanji 1978: 64).

[12]D. Matringe quite accurately translates this verse in French as: 'il inversa le cours du Gange'.

[13]Sat Panth which refers to the Indian Nizari religion, means literally the 'True path' and is the equivalent of the Arabic *din-al haq* and *sirat-e mustaqim* by which the Ismailis themselves traditionally referred to their faith. It should be noted that the latter term has also been used by the Wahhabis of Iraq who claimed to represent the orthodox form of Islam.

[14]As is well known, *gurmukhi* also refers to the sacred scripture of the Sikhs. But this similiarity, as many other ones, has unfortunately escaped the attention of the specialists of Sikhism who have never taken into account the presence of a strong Ismaili centre in Punjab.

[15]Note here that the sequence is somewhat different from that described by Ivanow for the Fatimid period.

[16]Personal communication by A. Rahmatoullah to whom I am indebted for sharing his profound knowledge of the Ismaili tradition.

[17]The Nizari *jamat-khana*, as a prayer hall, must be carefully distinguished from the *jamat-khana* of the Sufi *khanqas* which were like pilgrim rest-houses. However, it is probable that this term was consciously borrowed by the Ismailis, as its quasi synonym *dharamsala* (later referred

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to as *gurudvara*) was used by the Sikhs, giving thus a different meaning to the word. *Dharamsala* was also used by the Nizari Imamshahis of Gujarat in the same sense. In both cases, the reason of using the same word with a different meaning may well have been the necessity of keeping secret one's religious activities. Like Ismailis, Sikhs could have appeared as Shia heretics to the Sunni rulers who preferred their subjects to revert to Hinduism rather than to embrace another form of 'unorthodox' Islam; once more, this important fact has generally been overlooked by scholars.

[18]In the Ismaili philosophy the cycles of time associated with Imams and Prophets are somewhat comparable to the Hindu yugas and kalpas. See for example, Daftary 1990: 139, 394. On Kalki as the Mahdi, see Khan 1997b and Khan and Moir 2000a.

[19]I am grateful to Zawahir Moir and Francoise Mallison who told me about this fascination tradition. Thanks to their information, I have been able to visit myself some of these 'Nikalank mandirs' in Kutch and Saurasthra.

[20]Personal communicaiton by Shafique Virani who has made a series of interesting inquiries among some Gupti communities of Bhavnagar in Gujarat.

[21]My thanks are due to Zawahir Moir who told me about these fascinating details.

[22]I owe this precious information to Mr. Nizar Ali Mackwani.

[23]For a brief survey of this theme, see Shackle and Moir 1992: 69–78.

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